# Chapter 6
# Erasing the Magic Circle

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In striving to establish a theoretical framework for the academic study of games it is crucial that we, as game researchers, consider carefully the core concepts that pervade our work. Certain metaphors provide the very foundations upon which future research is to be built. If we are to move forward, we have to, as is the case with any developing field of study, take certain concepts as given. These are the tools of our trade. They allow us to progress without having to constantly try to re-invent the proverbial wheel. A great deal of work has recently gone into defining our object of study. Efforts at synthesising and refining previous game definitions undertaken by Juul (2005) and Salen and Zimmerman (2003) have been of great use in this respect. But the conceptual awareness I am advocating here delves deeper than definitions. It strikes at the assumptions that these definitions and other basic concepts that underlie our thinking about games take as given.

One of these crucial metaphors is the notion of the "magic circle". This metaphor, inspired by the work of Huizinga (1955b) has become popular within the study of games as a marker of a separation between the "real" or "ordinary" world and the game. This paper follows theorists like Copier (2007), Lammes (2006), Malaby (2007) and Taylor (2006) in questioning the utility of the concept for the analysis and understanding of digital games. Aside from the normative assumptions the concept has on the experiential dimension of game-play in general, it is particularly problematic when it is applied to digital games. The issue becomes particularly problematic when a metaphor adopted to help us understand a phenomenon actually mis-represents it. I will argue that this is the case with the magic circle.

The paper will first give an overview of the concept and its use within Game Studies. Then we will consider it's application in both formal and experiential contexts of separation. Finally the paper will demonstrate problems with applying the concept in the situated analysis of digital games through a concrete case study.

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## 6.1 The Magic Circle in Play

Initially coined by Huizinga (1955b) in *Homo Ludens,* the magic circle has been widely adopted by Game Studies theorists (Juul 2005; Salen and Zimmerman 2003) to articulate the spatial, temporal and psychological boundary between games and the real world:

> All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. . .The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e., forbidden spots, isolated hedged round, hallowed within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart (Huizinga 1955b, p. 12).

The apartness described here is a defining element of play, to which Huizinga returns frequently throughout his work. For Huizinga, play is a "stepping out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own" (Huizinga 1955b, p. 9). In addition, all forms of play, be they those engaged in by humans or animals, have some form of rules and it is the adherence to and upholding of these rules that structure and sustain the magic circle (p. 12).

According to Huizinga, the rule-based nature of the magic circle creates "an absolute and peculiar order" (p. 10) within its boundary. The relationship between order and play is a crucial one for Huizinga as only with a vision of play as *the* ideal of organized human social structures can he go on to use play as an epiphenomenon upon which other aspects of human society and culture and can be compared and measured. Huizinga's interest in play can be traced to his 1919 book *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Huizinga 1954). In this early work Huizinga argues that despite the unattainable nature of chivalric ideals, chivalry survived long after the socio-cultural contexts that engendered it died because of it's play-like qualities. Later, in *The Shadow of Tomorrow* (Huizinga and Huizinga 1936), Huizinga argues that the crisis in which the world found itself in at the time of writing was symptomatic of a culture which had perverted the ideals of play. So it is no surprise that in his final work we find such a definitive statement about the ordered nature of play:

> Here we come across another, very positive, feature of play: it creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme (Huizinga 1955b).

The magic circle is thus the boundary between order and chaos, between the idealized ritual of play and the mess of ordinary life. As Anchor (1978) points out, the notion of a distinct boundary between play and the real world becomes the cornerstone of a model of play against which higher forms of culture are measured. Once the play model is established in the first chapter of *Homo Ludens,* Huizinga goes on a tour of facets of culture such as: language, law, war, ritual and ritual; discussing how each expresses the play concept.

Although Huizinga sees play as separate from the real, his principal argument rests on proving that the play element pervades (and even precedes) all aspects of

human culture. The apart-ness of play is the apart-ness of ritual, which, Huizinga points out, shares all of the characteristics of play:

> Formally speaking, there is no distinction whatever between marking out a space for a sacred purpose and marking it out for purposes of sheer play. The turf, the tennis court, the chess board and pavement-hopstoch cannot be distinguished from the temple or the magic circle (Huizinga 1955b, p. 20).

Salen and Zimmerman, in *Rules of Play,* review a series of prior game definitions in order to build their own. The definition has, as one of its core elements, the quality of artificiality written into it. This is later expanded upon in a chapter dedicated to the magic circle, which discusses the boundary that sets games apart from the real world:

> Although the magic circle is merely one of the examples in Huizinga's list of "play grounds", the term is used here as short-hand for the idea of a special place in time and space created by a game. The fact that the magic circle is just that-a circle-is an important feature of this concept. As a closed circle, the space it circumscribes is enclosed and separate from the real world... Within the magic circle, special meanings accrue and cluster around objects and behaviours. In effect, a new reality is created, defined by the rules of the game and inhabited by its players (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, pp. 95–96).

Salen and Zimmerman emphasize the importance of the bounded nature of games by comparing idle toying with an object, what Caillois (1962) has referred to as *paidia*, with the formal rule-based activity, called *ludus*, of a game such as Tic-Tac-Toe. Free-play thus becomes a game when the structured frame of the magic circle is imposed upon it. Later, Salen and Zimmerman argue that the magic circle surrounding games can either be open or closed, depending on the perspective, or "schema", as they call it, one adopts. According to them, games can be viewed as a system made up of rules; as a form of play activity and as a form of culture. In the case of the first, games are considered as closed systems completely separate from the external world. In the case of the second, they can be both open and closed since this depends upon our bracketing the game-play experience from the rest of the player's lived history or not. Finally, games as culture are open systems with a permeable boundary.

There are some conflicts between Huizinga's conception of play and the magic circle and Salen and Zimmerman's appropriation thereof. Huizinga does not use the magic circle merely as one example of a list of play-grounds. As was discussed above, the apartness described by the metaphor of the magic circle is a salient feature of all the facets of culture he discusses and the magic circle becomes a shorthand for the notion of boundedness of play, and consequently other facets of cultural life with are ritualized in a similar manner. Huizinga, in fact, talks specifically about the magic circle in law: "But whether square or round it is still a magic circle, a play-ground where the customary difference of rank are temporarily abolished (Huizinga 1955b, p. 77)"; war: "Despite appearances to the contrary, therefore, war has not freed itself form the magic circle of play" (p. 210) and spirituality: "The human mind can only disengage itself from the magic circle of play by turning towards the ultimate" (p. 212). The model, of which the notion of bounded separation represented by the magic circle is part, is a template upon

which the other cultural situations are compared to and measured. The concept is not, thus, just one example among many as a number of game theorists (Crawford 2009; Dovey and Kennedy 2006; Liebe 2008; Salen and Zimmerman 2003) have erroneously claimed, but a core feature of all the examples given.

Salen and Zimmerman sideline the central point of Huizinga's work when they argue for a non-bounded perspective on the cultural schema of games. Proving that cultural constructions are play-like and thus set aside from ordinary life is exactly Huizinga's central argument. Since the concept of the magic circle is at the heart of Huizinga's perspective, one cannot adopt it without taking also on board its user's principal argument. The confusion is compounded by the fact that Salen and Zimmerman seem to be using Huizinga in a positive manner, while at the same time going against the main thrust of his argument without forwarding a coherent critique thereof.

Salen and Zimmerman's use of the magic circle is here being focused on because numerous game researchers have taken it on as a defacto characteristic of games. Others, sensing the problematic implications of a circle, which is sometimes closed and sometimes open, have tried to forward modifications of the concept. Castronova (2005), for example, replaces the metaphor of the magic circle with that of the membrane, arguing that the latter is a better metaphor since it allows for a one-way traffic between games and the real world. In his view, the game inevitably informs the everyday experience of the player, but players should guard the magic of the game world from becoming tainted with real-life concerns.

Although Castronova finds the magic circle problematic and tries to work around it by using the concept of the membrane, the rest of *Synthetic Worlds* is replete with references to a separability between virtual worlds (or synthetic worlds, in Castronova's terms) and "the Earth". Castronova is unable to break out of the dualist conceptualisation of separability he earlier attempts to sidestep. He problematically sets virtual worlds apart from the Earth, which is associated with the destruction of otherwise beautiful fantasies that can be sustained in virtual worlds:

> When Earth's culture dominates, the game will be over, the fantasy will be punctured and the illusion will be ended for good... Living there will no longer be any different from living here, and a great opportunity to play the game of human life under different, fantastical rules will have been lost (p. 196).

There are clear difficulties in the application of the magic circle in close analyses. Contrary to Juul's (2008) claim, the magic circle is anything but a "straightforward phenomenon" (p. 58), accounting as it does for the complexity of inter-relationships between personal experience, culture and reality. Like Salen and Zimmerman, Juul seems to ignore the fact that the metaphor in Huizinga accounts for an entire worldview, not simply the space "where the game takes place" (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, p. 95). A metaphor laden with meaning, as the magic circle is within Huizinga, comes with an ontological baggage that cannot be discounted or ignored. Once we adopt the use of the term, we are also take on the ontology that places a distinct division between the reality/seriousness/utility and play/non-seriousness/gratuitousness (Ehrmann 1968). The difficulties with the magic

circle that are erupting within game studies might, in fact, exist because Huizinga's initial formulation thereof was inherently flawed.

Ehrmann (1968) criticizes Huizinga for conceiving of "ordinary life" or "reality" as a stable entity that can be compared, contrasted and measured against play. Huizinga takes for granted the existence of a "reality", perpetually escorted by the hesitant presence of quotation marks, that can, in some non-specified manner, be divorced from culture and/or play. But as Ehrmann rightly argues, there is no reality outside of the culture that constructs it:

> The problem of play is therefore not *linked* to the problem of "reality," itself linked to the problem of culture. It is one and the same problem. In seeking a solution it would be methodologically unsound to proceed as if play were a variation, a commentary *on*, an interpretation, or a reproduction *of* reality. To pretend that play is mimesis would suppose the problem solved before it had even been formulated (33–34).

Reality cannot be bracketed by closed or open circles, even if we could argue that a concept such as the latter is logically possible. Reality does not *contain* play; like any other socio-culture construction, play is an intractable manifestation of reality. A consideration of games, whether be it from the perspective of the game as object, game as activity or the game's role in the wider community, *is* a consideration of reality. As Taylor (2006) has rightly argued, such a perspective ignores the grounded analysis of these objects and activities while sidelining the fact that they are very much part and parcel of the mundane, everyday reality.

Huizinga himself does not manage to sustain the dichotomy between the play-element, and consequently those aspects of culture that correspond to it, and the "ordinary life" it is distinguished from. A symptom of this uneasy dichotomy is Huizinga's exposition of the relationship between play and seriousness. As Anchor argues:

> On the one hand, Huizinga repeatedly insisted that play does not exclude seriousness – if the two were mutually exclusive, it would obviously make no sense to ask how far culture itself bears the character of play. On the other hand, Huizinga was equally insistent on maintaining play and seriousness as two separate categories. As a result of this ambiguity, he was unable to provide an objective criterion for judging where play ends and seriousness begins (Anchor 1978, p. 87).

According to Ehrmann there is a tension in Huizinga between arguing for play as a primary component of culture, and at the same time viewing it as a complement which can be subtracted leaving an impoverished, but intact whole. This is evident not only in *Homo Ludens,* but even earlier in his *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* where he attributes the decay of culture to the absence of the play-element therein. Huizinga describes play as an "accompaniment" (p. 9) or adornment to a reality external to it. Play is an addition to the "necesseties of life" (p. 9). And this allows Huizinga to retain play as an entity untainted by the interests of economics and utility, and is thus described as a "disinterested" (Huizinga 1955~~b~~, p. 9) or unproductive activity, which "stands outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites" (p. 9). But clearly the expenditure of energy and time creates *something*. Now since the play-space is cordoned off from the real, whatever is produced through play must be consumed within play itself, otherwise it runs the risk of atrophying the play-element (p. 198). This ideal of play is

not sustainable in actuality. As Ehrmann points out, the supposedly interior world of play cannot exist without reference to its exterior, and hence become an integral part of the same economy:

> The interior occupied by play can only be defined by and with the exterior of the world, and inversely that play viewed as an exterior is only comprehensible by and with the interior of the world; that together they participate in the same economy. Play cannot therefore be isolated as an activity without consequences. Its integrity, its gratuitousness are only apparent, since the very freedom of the expenditure made in it is part of a circuit which reaches beyond the spatial and temporal limits of play (Ehrmann 1968, pp. 42–43).

The theoretical problems in *Homo Ludens* Ehrmann points to stem from Huizinga's inability to reconcile a notion of play as bracketed from the everyday, utilitarian real; in other words a view of play as an ideal space circumscribed by the magic circle, and the claim that play pervades culture. As theorists like Anchor (1978), Ehrmann (1968), Fink (1968) and later Copier (2007), Lammes (2006), Malaby (2007), Pargmann and Jakobsson (2006) and Taylor (2006) have argued, a dichotomous view on the relationship between play/games and the real world does not survive close analysis, whether this is derived from the critical humanities or the applied social sciences. This is not simply a rejection of dichotomies for their own sake, as Juul (2008) states in his response to critical reactions to the magic circle, but an acknowledgement that a close reading of positions that characterize issues such as culture and experience in dichotomous ways is bound to run into methodological quandaries which result in reductive, mis-representations of the phenomenon under scrutiny. Juul argues that the critique of binary relationships is "a remnant of a battle fought long ago" (p. 64) and that game studies should move on. The battle has been fought long ago in various disciplines and it has been clearly established that such dichotomies are not the best foundations upon which to understand cultural phenomena, which is exactly why theorists like Copier, Malaby, Pargmann, Jakobsson, Taylor's and others have taken a stance against their uncritical re-introduction into game studies. The rest of the paper will give a situated account of *why* the concept of the magic circle is (a) redundant, and (b) misleading, when applied to the specific context of digital games.

## 6.2 The Magic Circle and Digital Games

Written in a pre-digital age, the treatment of play within *Homo Ludens* is based entirely upon socially agreed-upon and upheld conventions. Game researchers which consider games as a universal phenomenon ranging across various media such as Bryce and Rutter (2006), Juul (2005), Salen and Zimmerman (2003) rightly argue for an acknowledgement of the continuity between digital and non-digital games. As I have argued elsewhere (Calleja 2007), this taken for granted equivalence between physical and digital games is not tenable across all areas of research in games. The magic circle, predicated as it is on its being upheld by its participants (be they players, cultists, lawyers or poets) is strongly influenced by this question of

medium. The following sections will argue against the use of the magic circle in the case of digital games based on the two dimensions on which it is usually discussed: the formal separation in space and time and the psychological separation.

## 6.3 A Separation in Space

In *Half-Real* Juul (2005) draws on the magic circle to describe the relationship between the space where the games take place from the rest of the world. According to Juul, physical games and board games take place in a space which "is a subset of the space of the world: The space in which the game takes place is a subset of the larger world, and a magic circle delineates the bounds of the game" (Juul 2005, p. 164). The boundary can be made up of spatial perimeters and is often also temporally defined. The game can be limited to a specific area such as a tennis court or fencing piste', or woven into the everyday world such as in Live Action Role-Playing Games (LARPs), treasure hunts, and other forms of pervasive gaming. Here the spatial perimeter is less defined than the temporal one. The spatial and temporal boundaries of the magic circle in physical games are upheld by a social agreement clarifying the interpretation and validation of actions, utterances, and outcomes; in other words, the rules.

But in the case of digital games, where is the magic circle? Juul traces the magic circle of digital games through the hardware devices that enable their representation:

> [T]he magic circle is quite well defined since a video game only takes place on the screen and using the input devices (mouse, keyboard, controllers) rather than in the rest of the world; hence there is no "ball" that can be out of bounds (Juul 2005, pp. 164–165).

He goes on to compare the magic circle in physical games with that in digital games based on the spatial qualities of each. With physical games the magic circle separates real world space from game space, while in the case of digital games the magic circle separates the fictional world of the game from the game space. The latter is based on an assumption that "the space of a game is *part of* the world in which it is played, but the space of a fiction is *outside* the world from which it is created" (p. 164). In the case of digital games, the utility of the magic circle's function as a marker where rules apply loses its analytical relevance. In physical games the distinction is needed because the game rules are upheld socially. Actions that take place within the marked area of the game, when this exists, are interpreted differently from actions outside that area. In most digital games the distinction is void since the only on-screen space that one can act in is the navigable space of the virtual environment. The stadium stands in *FIFA 09* (EA Sports 2008) or the space outside the combat area in *Battlefield 1942* (Digital Illusions CE. 2002) cannot be traversed, they are merely a representational backdrop. The role of the magic circle as spatial marker is thus redundant when applied to digital games.

The question of fictionality has been discussed at great length in literary theory and its adaptation to digital games would require a more lengthy treatment than is the scope of the present paper. Walsh (2007) makes a compelling case against

dualist separations of fiction based on the rhetorical specificity of the language (here used in a broad sense of codified systems of representation in any medium) in which the fiction is communicated:

> Fictionality, I would suggest, functions within a communicative framework: it resides in a way of using language, and its distinctiveness consists in recognizably distinct rhetorical set invoked by that use... If fictionality consists in a distinct way of using language, it is not explained by attaching its distinctiveness to some quarantine mechanism conceived precisely to maintain its conformity with non-fictional usage, at the cost of detaching it, in one way or another, from its actual communicative context (p. 15).

As Walsh argues throughout his work, the qualities of fiction cannot be fully described formally because they are intrinsically built into the reality of the language that conveys the fiction. If anything, the most enduring fictional worlds like Tolkien's Middle Earth are appealing because they draw so heavily on established cultural texts and contexts (Northrup 2004). Juul's assertion that games are made of "real rules and fictional worlds" (Juul 2005, p. 1) hides the fact that both game rules and the representation of fiction are designed constructs, neither of which carries or denies a claim to reality.

## 6.4 The Experiential Dimension

More problematically, the concept of the magic circle has also been applied to the experiential dimension of game-play. Within game studies it is often taken as a given that game-play involves entering a particular experiential mode that was described by Bernard Suits (1978) as the "lusory attitude" (p. 52). The lusory attitude is closely tied to the notion of the magic circle because it is similarly built on the assumption that players voluntarily step into an attitude which is apart from ordinary life; an experiential mode that occurs only during game playing:

> The attitude of the game player must be an element in game playing because there has to be an explanation of that curious state of affairs wherein one adopts rules which require one to employ worse rather than better means to reach an end (p. 52).

The voluntary decision to follow an inefficient course of action in order to play by the rules only applies to the socially negotiated aspect of digital games. But the majority of actions possible are programmed into the game system and cannot be changed. I cannot decide to not adhere to the game rules in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) and have my character run at twice the speed. If there is an item, ability, or spell that allows me to do so, it lies within the structure of the game rules and its use is thus in adherence to them.

But a more serious problem with Suits' notion of the lusory attitude is that it is formulated as a defining element of games. This creates a problematically circular argument that essentially claims games are activities that require a lusory attitude and that the lusory attitude is an experience that occurs when playing a game. Ifwe had to follow Suits' logic, the inability in a number of digital games, particularly

single-player ones, to voluntarily adopt inefficient means in playing them means that we cannot enter into a lusory attitude, and thus such activities are not games.

As Malaby (2007) points out, we cannot logically use play to refer to both a mode of human experience and a form of activity. In other words, we cannot say that when we engage with a game we are entering a particular experiential mode (the lusory attitude, for example) determined by the very act of engaging with the game. As Taylor argues, these forms of experientially deterministic arguments simplify the complexity of game engagement:

> While the notion of a magic circle can be a powerful tool for understanding some aspects of gaming, the language can hide (and even mystify) the much messier relationship that exists between spheres – especially in the realm of MMOGs. . . It often sounds as if for play to have any authenticity, meaning, freedom, or pleasure, it must be cordoned off from real life. In this regard, MMOG (and more generally, game) studies has much to learn from past scholarship. Thinking of either game or nongame-space as contained misses the flexibility of both (Taylor 2006, p. 152).

The objection to the magic circle as a form of experiential bracketing has been particularly strong from researchers conducting qualitative studies with players. Ethnographic work by Taylor (2006), Malaby (2007), Copier (2007), and Pargman and Jakobsson (2006) indicates that such a separation is not found in the situated study of gamers:

> Problems with using the concept of the magic circle as an analytical tool have made themselves known now and again. These problems become especially clear when the researcher in question has actual empirical material at hand that he or she without much success tries to understand by applying the dominant paradigm of the separateness of play (Pargman and Jakobsson 2006, p. 18).

An attempt to create a clean demarcation between the game-experience and the experience of the world (supposedly) external to it will be severely challenged to explain how the players' personal and social histories can be excluded from the game activity. It is hardly possible for the game-space to block out the complexity of social and personal relations. The lived experience of the players invariably informs, to different degrees depending on circumstance, the experience of the game and vice-versa.

The experiential separation of play becomes even more problematic when contemporary developments in digital games, like Massively Multiplayer Online Games (hereafter referred to as MMOGs), are considered. Activities like planning and coordinating 40 man raids in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), which include several hours of tedious "farming"[i] of items that will be needed to ensure the success of the raid, are often viewed as boring chores rather than pleasurable play. Yee has collected a wealth of quantitative data on MMOG players and in a recent paper published in *Games and Culture* he observes how MMOG "playing" can often feel like a second job:

> The average MMORPG[ii] player spends 22 hours a week playing the game. And these are not only teenagers playing. The average MMORPG gamer is in fact 26 years old. About half of these players have a full time job. Every day, many of them go to work and perform an assortment of clerical tasks, logistical planning and management in their offices, then

> they come home and do those very same things in MMORPGs. Many players in fact characterize their game-play as a second job: "It became a chore to play. I became defacto leader of a guild and it was too much. I wanted to get away from real life and politics and social etiquette followed me in (Yee 2006, p. 69).

Further examples of the inadequacy of the magic circle to account for the experience of digital game-play come in a host of other forms: companies employing people to farm in-world gold and sell it on e-Bay or offer character levelling services, social and cultural issues that crop up whenever you have masses of people interact in persistent environments, virtual worlds which require real money expenditure for the acquisition of virtual goods, such as *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003) or *Project Entropia* (MindArk 2003) and more. Dibbell (2006) has written a compelling account of his forays in the trade of virtual assets and gold. In order to investigate the phenomenon often referred to as "real money trade" or the exchange of virtual world items for widely accepted currency, Dibbell embarked upon a year long stint buying and selling property, goods and gold in the popular *Ultima Online* (Origin Systems 1997) MMOG. Dibbell's *Play Money* is a self-reflexive meditation on the wide spectrum of experiences that MMOGs enable and the profound impact these experiences can have on a person's life. Dibbell describes how his engagement with *Ultima Online* transformed from a form of entertainment to a full time job. He uses his experiences to foreground the inadequacy of the magic circle and the application of the work/play binary to MMOGs.

But aside from such obvious examples, it is generally difficult to bracket off an aspect of experience that expresses a specific mind-set entered into during game-play. This is particularly evident in digital games since the upholding of the game-rules is, for the most part, upheld by the machine code. It would be incredibly mis-leading to label all forms of interactions in virtual environments with ludic properties as having a specific experiential disposition by the very virtue of engagement therein. We are better served by furthering our understanding of game engagement un-burdened by such normative assumptions.

Before concluding the paper I will briefly discuss why the magic circle did not figure in my research with player involvement and immersion in digital games. Its inclusion would have mis-represented the phenomenon under scrutiny, creating a boundary where none existed.

## 6.5 Contexts

My doctoral dissertation analyzes factors that influence player involvement in digital games. An important part of the argument is a model that describes the different forms of involvement that games can potentially engage players with. The model plots the different forms of involvement along a temporal scale ranging from general motivation to play games to the situated instance of game-play. If I had taken the notion of the magic circle on board when building my model, I would have needed to signal a point where players "entered" the magic circle; a point in

time where activities undertaken are tinged with a playful attitude (Suits 1978; Salen and Zimmerman 2003). Although research participants discussed various attitudes towards the game along with a host of aspects that clearly engaged them, there was no mention of such a shift into a specific attitude that coloured all others. If anything, a number of players expressed how games became subsumed as part of their everyday lives and, vice-versa, how everyday life became infused with discussions and thoughts surrounding games. By placing into question the validity of a clear line of demarcation between game and non-game we open up the analysis of game involvement beyond the formal parameters of the game. This requires a perspective on involvement that extends along a continuum of attentional intensity ranging from a general motivation to participate in digital games to a focused deep involvement and finally the incorporation[1] of the represented space into a habitable and immediately accessible domain for exerting agency.

A dichotomous boundary view of player involvement tells us very little about the nature of the experience, and more importantly it hides the fact that game experiences vary hugely among different games, different players of those games and each specific sitting. By leaving behind an either/or perspective and focusing on the specificities of the individual engagement, we open up our inquiry to a richer understanding of the feedback loop between player and game that is not normatively pre-determined by simplistic binaries.

This thinking extends to notions of immersion and presence. The depth of engagement the terms describe tends to similarly be expressed in terms of either/or relationships: present or not. These assumptions are pronounced in the metaphor of the submergence of the participant *into* the virtual environment, a subjective cogito poured into a containing vessel:

> The experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place is pleasurable in itself, regardless of the fantasy content. Immersion is a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air that takes over all our attention our whole perceptual apparatus (Murray 1998, p. 98).

Presence has similar connotations, but its application is focused more by what I will argue is one of the two simultaneously occurring, defining aspects of the phenomenon: the anchoring of participants to a specific location within the virtual environment that objects and entities within it react to. Up to this point the metaphor works. But it also typically refers to the placing of the participant's subjectivity inside the environment in the same way as immersion does. Both metaphors imply a uni-directional process that disguises the most potent elements of the phenomenon in the context of virtual environments. As has been discussed in depth elsewhere (Calleja 2007), the potency of experience lies in the increasing ease and immediacy with which we can extend multiple dimensions of our lived

[1] For a more detailed discussion of the phenomenon of incorporation see *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* available from MIT Press as of Spring 2011.

experience to contemporary virtual environments, particularly in the case of digital games. As the complexity and sophistication of these digital media increase, the metaphor of everyday life becomes more easily adaptable to experiences within them. By everyday life I am here referring to the composite nature of contemporary being in its social and media-saturated cultural dimensions. The appeal of otherness that these environments promise becomes organized by the same structuring principles of the everyday social world. Herein lies the power of the composite phenomenon that presence and immersion allude to: a process of internalization and experiential structuring that is compelling precisely because it draws on our fundamental social learning. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) emphasize this dynamic of transference between experiential gestalts as the core of their experientialist ontology:

> The nature of our bodies and our physical and cultural environment imposes a structure on our experience, in terms of natural dimensions of the sort we have discussed. Recurrent experience leads to the formation of categories, which are experiential gestalts with those natural dimensions. Such gestalts define coherence in our experience. We understand our experience directly when we see it as being structured coherently in terms of gestalts that have emerged directly from interaction with and in our environment. We understand experience metaphorically when we use a gestalt from one domain of experience to structure experience in another domain (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, p. 226).

Because of the accumulated definitional and disciplinary issues associated with the use of "presence" and "immersion" I have elsewhere argued that a new term is necessary to permit effective inquiry into the distinctive qualities of virtual environments that moves beyond the dichotomous perspective implied by the current literature on "presence" and "immersion". I have used the metaphor of "incorporation" to signify an internalization of the digital environment that makes it present to the participant's consciousness as a domain for exerting agency *while simultaneously* being present to others within it through the figure of the avatar. The logic behind the displacement of the immersion and presence terms was necessary precisely because the binary they imply becomes detrimental, as a conceptual foundation, to a theory that seeks to explain an intensely subjective and sub-conscious form of experience.

## 6.6 Conclusion

As game studies researchers we have the opportunity to adopt existing theoretical frameworks, models and concepts from other disciplines, or to shape our own. Existing academic work in related fields can yield rich perspectives on our research interests, but we need to be particularly cautious when selecting the foundational concepts and metaphors that pervade our work. Starting an analysis of games, or any other cultural artefact or activity, as surrounded by a boundary, no-matter how fuzzy or permeable, presents the immediate challenge of articulating what lies outside of that boundary. Whether it's the "real", "ordinary" or "everyday", notions

of boundaries require our object of inquiry to be contrasted and measured against a stable reality external to it. But as scholars in a variety of fields that have contended with this problem have argued, the thing we are analysing is a manifestation of the reality we seek to cordon it off from. Of course, Huizinga and Caillois were writing at a time when such ontological partitioning had not yet been challenged by the critical lens of post-structuralism. Writing in the twenty-first century, we do have the luxury of such an argument and cannot just bury our heads in the proverbial sand and take on such terms uncritically.

Why work with a metaphor that is laden with such problematic implications when there are far better perspectives in various fields that represent the phenomenon in question? Pargmann and Jakobsson (2006) as well as Crawford (2009), for example, have advocated the use of Goffman's (1986) frame analysis to understand the interpretation of social conventions that game-rules ultimately are. This takes a body of research that is specifically aimed at explaining the complexity of interpreting social situations and the related structures (such as rules) involved. Of course, there are other frameworks we can draw from, but let us settle on concepts that are analytically productive not problematically reductive. It seems as though we have adopted an overly simplistic concept from Huizinga merely because he represents an early engagement with the study of play (and partially games). There are a number of interesting observations Huizinga has made about the role of play in culture, but the concept of the magic circle, and his overall perspective on culture simply do not live up to contemporary scrutiny.

On a related note, as Crawford (2009) and Liebe (2008) have argued, the media specificities of digital games require an altogether different consideration of social and experiential dimensions than physical and board games do. On top of this, the particular media configuration found in digital games makes the magic circle particularly unproductive, if not outright mis-leading. It is high time that we abandon the concept of the magic circle altogether, (along with modifications thereof), in favour of more nuanced and analytically productive concepts specifically adopted for the particular focus we are taking on the complex and varied phenomenon that is digital game-play.



## Endnote

i. Farming refers to the activity of mechanical harvesting resources or repeatedly killing mobs that are known to drop items, materials or gold as a goal in itself.

ii. MMORPG stands for Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game. This term is sometimes used interchangeably with MMOG or Massively Multiplayer Online Game. The former is a subset of the latter which includes other MMO genres such as MMOFPS or Massively Multiplayer Online First Person Shooter and MMORTS, Massively Multiplayer Online Real Time Strategy. I will be using the term MMOG to refer to all these genres of online games.

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